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### Mixing musical identities in improvising musicians

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# **Mixing musical identities in improvising musicians**

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# Improvisation in contemporary musical practice

- Improvisation is emerging as a scene drawing together players with affiliations to very different genres
- A non-verbal, simultaneous social creative process
- Social aspect often overlooked in studies of individuals improvising
- Tendency to assume that 'improvising' has universal meaning or implications

# Improvisation & musical identity

- Participants' talk about their involvement in musical activities (including listening) help construct and maintain particular musical identities.
- A community of reasoners (Resnick et al, 1997)
- If musicians bring diverse identities to improvising together, there should be reasoning within that community when they talk about the activity of improvisation

# Improvisation & musical identity

Previous studies of jazz musicians indicate that:

- Identity as a jazz musician is negotiated in a social context (MacDonald & Wilson 2005)
- Hegemonic influences are apparent in the identity work of individuals describing their practice (MacDonald & Wilson 2006)
- Negotiations involve handling discrete repertoires of mastery and mystery in accounting for improvising (Wilson & MacDonald 2005)



# Repertoires

- are consistent patterns of description in talk
- function to invite particular interpretations of things, people, or events
- do not necessarily represent internally held views, but may be deployed by individuals in particular contexts to particular ends.



# Mastery & mystery in jazz musicians' talk

## – Repertoire of *mastery*

K ...it's not always that kind of romantic notion that everybody has, ya know, there has to be some sort of effort.

H Yeah it doesn't magically happen.

K There has to be effort and there has to be some degree of training.

## – Repertoire of *mystery*

– H Which is another point about improvising, when you're truly improvising you're playing with this intensity. And y-you don't really care what, mistakes just go by and it's like, doesnae matter cause you're playing with intensity and (.) and passion // and -

J //Improvising a full solo of intense mistakes.

# Mastery & mystery in jazz musicians' talk

Both repertoires used –

- Mastery emphasises achievement, but suggests anyone can do it given time
- Mystery suggests exclusivity of improvisers, but accords them less agency in what they do

Among jazz musicians, accounts of improvising based on mastery were always endorsed, while those based on mystery were always treated ironically



# Study

How do improvising musicians from *diverse* musical backgrounds negotiate and maintain identities relating to their shared improvisatory practices?

# Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra

- Rehearse & perform regularly in Glasgow and abroad
- Large ensemble of 20+ musicians from jazz, classical, pop & avant-garde backgrounds.
- Commitment to free or experimental improvisation.



# Method

- 10 GIO musicians with varied backgrounds interviewed individually about improvising
- Interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using discursive psychological methods.
- Particular attention was paid to participants' use within their discourse of interpretative repertoires.



# Common themes

- psychological argot

*...when there's twenty people that everybody is in that kind of, in that zone of thinking 'yes this is great'...*

- own/group sound

*...well there was one occasion I can think of at that concert, where I thought: wow that's really amazing, um (.) and that was that was because of hearing something that I'd done, fitting in with everything else.*



# Mastery endorsed

*...I want to be able to just have all these colours for when it comes up, and respond to what is going on and you know improve my technique to the point where I'm doing that bit*

*I think the technical capacity I have on my chosen instrument informs my improvising*



# Mastery not endorsed

*...for me it's about not having the either the learning or the time spent studying this instrument that allows it to be quite a blank canvas... I imagine for some people improvisation is based on a knowledge of what different combinations of notes um chords and scales can be, whereas it's not for me.*



# Mystery endorsed

- ...that music is abstract, it's unplanned for, it's something, maybe it's more powerful [unclear] because it can't be described but yet it, it makes it so deeply we have these these spine tingling moments and it inspires us and gives us energy...*
- ...it's purely by intuition isn't it? You know for me I think you just react*
- ...when you're no longer really thinking about what you're doing when you're within it within the music where it's just (.) you're just almost being guided by the music you're not actually acting (.) to me you know that's the ultimate*
- ...improvised music when it works, cause it is stunning it's absolutely from nowhere*
- ...at other points it just seemed to have these these magical moments out of it...*



# Mystery endorsed

*... the first thing I would connect improvising with in the music that I do is, is that thing about picking up instruments that I don't really know what to do with, kind of thing, and and just seeing what happens.*

*I never studied music, um and I generally – I mean I have a basic kind of theoretical knowledge, but it's fairly basic – um it's the only way I really know*





# Mystery ironised

Mystery repertoire was sometimes ironised  
as in jazz musicians' talk, but only  
occasionally

*...it all depends I think to my mind how  
primed you are to apprehend this kind of  
spontaneous creative aural mash [laughs].*



# Trained and outsider identities

- Musicians endorsing the mystery repertoire identify themselves as from ‘bands’ or as ‘improvisers’

*I started getting less interested in the piano and more interested in the guitar. Just because it seemed that that's what other people did, you know, just getting into sort of bands and things like that...*



# Trained and outsider identities

- But others identify themselves as trained professional musicians

*...I feel more like I'm making music, you know especially now that being a classical musician, because I don't have a job, full time job, er I quite often will go for a good few months and all I'll play is like: Fiddler on the Roof twice or something*



# Identities negotiated in talk

*... I don't like to see people messing, [laughs] I suppose like messing around and things they can't play, do you know, [uh-huh] do you know what I mean, and I know there are people who mightn't be able to read music or... that's not what I mean, you know it's just that I think that what makes it is that all all of us in GIO are highly skilled on our instruments, and I don't think, and I think that anybody who's not, will find it very hard to improvise*



# Identities negotiated in talk

*... when I've been doodling (.) either on the, on whichever instrument that I've been playing (.) that doesn't necessarily constitute improvising as I see it now. Where of course it is, but ...*

*Some people are very good at doing one thing, and they're they're, what they provide to the orchestra, in another sense isn't isn't isn't so um I don't know isn't, doesn't make as big a difference, it might make a difference, everything has it has it has its place...*



# Identities negotiated in talk

*Well everyone in the orchestra is an awesome player, there's no doubt about that, apart from me... but I think there's folks there who ...you know who are obviously coming from a sort of um the er free form folk kind of or kind of unskilled [yeah] and I don't mean that in a derogatory way at all...*

# Discussion

When musicians with different musical identities talk about improvisation, differences in their use of discursive devices (mastery & mystery repertoires) emerge.

Assertions about what improvisation is and positioning of self are negotiated and must be considered in the immediate and wider social context

Important to consider psychological explanations for musical phenomena in relation to diverse musical agents (e.g. beyond jazz professionals or conservatoire culture)